What Do You Mean You're Not Interested In Sex?

American Life and Law from an Asexual Perspective

By Amanda C. Lee

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"I think you're using that word wrong."[i]

Asexuality, the lack of sexual attraction to either male or females, is the oft forgotten and overlooked aspect of human sexuality, and is considered relatively new as an identity or sexual orientation. For much of the modern period it has been seen as a sexual dysfunction and mental illness.[ii] When homosexuality and other orientations began to be discussed and slowly de-medicalized, asexuality was once again overlooked—perhaps because it encompasses an even smaller percentage of the population,[iii] or because of cultural stigma.[iv]

Lack of visibility makes it hard for a community to form. It was not until the advent of the internet, and its allowance for anonymity, that we began to see the development of an asexual identity and culture. The first asexual forum and education site was founded in 2001, making it barely a decade old. It was not always easy to find either, as initially searches for the term 'asexual' were more likely to bring an individual to websites about plant and single-cell organisms than human sexuality. In so many ways the asexual identity is new and fragile, and the fight for acceptance is just beginning.

As any member of a minority group can tell you, it is not easy being different. For all that our culture desires to celebrate and embrace diversity, huge cultural pressures encourage people to mold themselves to fit the "norm." Our language itself reflects this pressure. We refer to the primary culture—the "norm"—as mainstream, and those cultures that do not fit are referred to as "sub-cultures." Those who rebel against the mainstream often refer to themselves as countercultural or cultural outlaws.[v]

If you are a member of a very, very small minority it can be even more difficult to be different. You are far less likely to see anyone like you represented in the media. More importantly those around you are far more likely to be dismissive of your differences, or downright hostile to them, because they have not seen anyone like you represented in the media either. So clearly there is something wrong with you. When people think there is something wrong with you, they often feel they have the right, sometimes even the obligation, to help you correct that "wrong" regardless of whether you see it as a problem or not.

I have never been what one could call conventional for a whole host of reasons. I was different in so many ways that trying to label and understand

all my differences was challenging. By the time I started high school I had already internalized and accepted terms like "freak," and "weirdo." I did not start parsing out all the things that made me so alien to my peers until college. But one of the most noticeable differences became apparent during junior high and high school. My "crushes" were largely superficial. I picked those who I thought were pretty or nice, but whom I was certain would not return any advances. I was lonely, but for friendships more than romances. There were times I longed for a relationship more emotionally intimate than friendship, for someone to cuddle with and hold hands with, but my thoughts never went beyond snuggling. Puberty came and went and sexual interest never appeared. I faked sexual interest because that is what I thought I was supposed to do.

I was not very good at faking interest though, not in those earlier years, and probably not later. Nearly two decades later and I still recall a comment from some girls my sophomore year of high school. They were chatting about boyfriends and sexual relationships and I made a comment. I no longer recall my own comment, only the reaction which was dismissive and harsh in tone, "We just always assumed you were asexual, you know, like a plant."

"You can't be asexual, you're not a plant."

The origins of the word, its common scientific use, and how its evolved

One of the first reactions to coming out as asexual is often an attempt to correct your word usage, hence the title of this and the previous sections. Like many English words asexual is derived from Latin. "A-" is a common Latin prefix used to note a negation and generally interpreted as "not."[vi] Sexual comes from the Latin word sexualis which is generally interpreted as relating to sex.[vii] The most commonly remembered and understood definitions are the biological definitions usually applied to plants and certain single celled organism "lacking sex or functional sexual organs."[viii] Merriam-Webster also lists a third definition, which is "devoid of sexuality."[ix]

It can be particularly hard to define something by what it lacks, which is another of the challenges that those within the asexual community face. Language is fluid, constantly needing to adapt to a changing society and world. Communities often find themselves trying to adapt old words to new meanings or creating new words for things that we could not find the right

words for. This can lead to confusion and frustration for those who are on the outside of that community. Below are the key terms most often used by those within the asexual community, their definitions, and their slang equivalents.

A useful glossary[x]

Term:	Colloquialism /Slang Term:	Definition:
•Asexual[xi]	Ace	A sexual orientation characterized by a persistent lack of sexual attraction to any gender.
•Demisexual	Demi	A demisexual does not experience sexual attraction unless they have already formed a strong emotional bond with the person. The bond may or may not be romantic in nature. Please note that there is a difference between demisexuality, which involves attraction, and "I do not have sex unless I love someone", which has to do with behavior.
•Gray-asexual	Gray-a/grace	A gray-asexual may infrequently experience sexual attraction or may experience low sexual desire, yet will generally identify as being close to asexual. Gray-asexuals differ from demisexuals in that demisexuals will require an emotional bond before experiencing attraction, yet graces do not necessarily require a bond. The word "gray" comes from the "gray area" between asexuality and non-asexuality.
•Allosexual[xii]	Non-ace; allo	A person who experiences sexual attraction to other people in a manner that is independent of preexisting attractions and possesses an intensity in a range regarded as normal. This term is used to distinguish this phenomenon from autosexual, demisexual, asexual and gray-asexual orientations.
•Asexual Spectrum	Ace spectrum	The grouping of asexual, demisexual, and gray-asexual under a single umbrella of related sexual orientation.
•Aromantic		A romantic orientation characterized by a persistent lack of romantic attraction toward any gender.
•Heteroromantic		A romantic orientation characterized by romantic attraction to the opposite gender.
•Biromantic		A romantic orientation characterized by romantic attraction to both males and females.
•Homoromantic		A romantic orientation characterized by romantic attraction to the same gender.
•Panromantic		A romantic orientation characterized by romantic attraction to any gender.

"Oh, so you're celibate? I didn't know you were religious."

As the titles of each section suggest, there are many misunderstandings and much confusion surrounding asexuality. One is the confusion of asexuality, abstinence, and celibacy. Abstinence is defined as "1: voluntary forbearance especially from indulgence of an appetite or craving or from eating some foods; 2: a : habitual abstaining from intoxicating beverages, b : abstention from sexual intercourse."[xiii] Celibacy is mostly commonly defined as abstinence from sexual intercourse, though it can also mean refraining from marriage.[xiv]

Asexuality is a sexual orientation, and orientations do not describe behavior they describe attraction.[xv] Orientation is not behavior, attraction is

not action.[xvi] Celibacy and abstinence both imply a sacrifice as one is preventing oneself from acting on a desire or impulse. Asexuality, like other orientations, is not a choice. Aces do not feel sexual attraction to others, and there is no sacrifice involved in not having a sexual relationship. Additionally desire and action are very different things. People will do things they may not desire to do for a variety of reasons. Someone may love chocolate but not eat it because of an allergy. Conversely someone may hate their job, but still go to work because they want to get paid.

The world of sex and sexual relationships is no different. There are those who are celibate by choice for a variety of reasons (religious calling, having just left a bad relationship, past trauma, waiting for marriage), and there are those who are involuntarily celibate (they have not yet met the right person, health and medical reasons). Conversely there are aces who have sex and there are a variety of reasons for having sex even if you are not interested (societal expectation, the desire for children, having a sexual romantic partner).[xvii] Compromise is a large part of relationships, and that is no different for asexual relationships

I do not consider myself celibate despite the fact that I have not had a sexual relationship in more than a decade. For me celibacy describes a sacrifice, a hardship. The last ten years or so of my life has been anything but a hardship. I have not missed sex, have not yearned for it nor bemoaned my lack. I could have had sexual partners within that time, and at least one relationship I pursued imploded because I **was not** interested in sex. So it was not a case of me just accepting the status quo and learning to live with it. I have had to learn how to live without sugar and most carbohydrates for health reasons, and that **has** been a sacrifice. I dream of those foods I am no longer allowed. I do not dream of sex. For me it would be like dreaming of lettuce, which I am neither crazy about nor disgusted by. Lettuce is just there. It is not something I think about without prompting, and even with prompting I will try to find something that does actually interest me.

"Everyone wants sex. You are just not getting any and want to feel special."

We each know what we experience on an individual basis, and as humans we are inclined to assume that everyone else's experience of that very same thing must be the same. There is even a term for this concept, metabolic

chauvinism.[xviii] We often judge people based on our experiences without any conscious awareness of that judgment; even when we actively trying to empathize with another, to see the world through their eyes, we cannot completely let go of our own experiences and perceptions.[xix] Being aware of our own metabolic chauvinism can help us empathize more with others, because awareness of the issue allows us to acknowledge its effect and attempt to move past it.

The majority of the world feels some level of sexual desire and experiences sexual attraction towards others in some form or fashion.[xx] Metabolic chauvinism leads them to conclude that **everyone** must have the same levels of desire or attraction, or at the very least some levels of desire of attraction. The idea that someone could not ever experience sexual desire, or that they might experience sexual desire but not attraction—that desire is not aimed at anyone, just a physical response—is completely inconceivable to them. Just like many people have trouble understanding why someone might not want or like chocolate, they cannot conceptualize not wanting sex. The responses for not wanting chocolate and not wanting sex are often similar. "What do you mean you do not want "x?" Everyone loves "x." Have you even tried it? Give it time, you'll come to like it eventually."

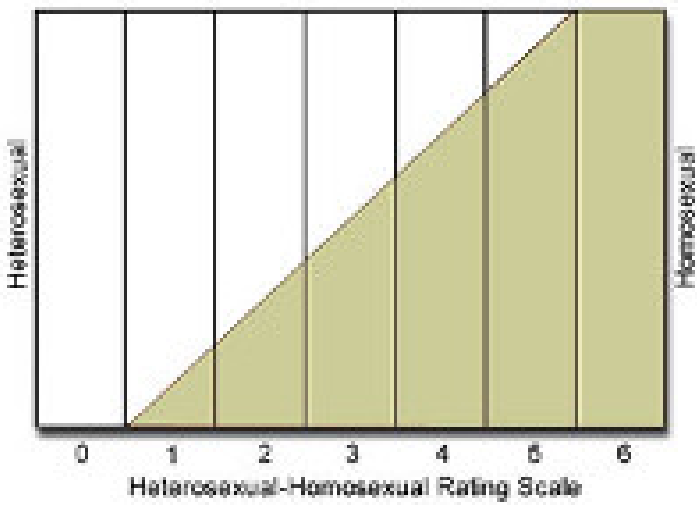
"You don't want to label yourself too soon. You just haven't met the right person yet."

Xs on the Kinsey Scale

Related to the "give it time" arguments are the "it's just a phase" and "you haven't met the right person yet" arguments. Many in the queer spectrum will be familiar with these arguments, as well as the "how can you know if you have not tried" argument because these are the same arguments that even today get used when someone comes out as gay, bi, lesbian, trans, queer, etc.. While it can be fun to turn these questions on their head as well as challenge the questioning party on when they knew they were heterosexual (or gay, bi, etc) it is not always as helpful as being able to point out studies that show it is not just a phase, nor is it a complete anomaly as others experience the same thing in a fairly steady percentage.

Sex and sexuality are often controversial subjects and discussing them frankly and openly is not something that has been common in western history. Our understandings of human brains, human sexuality, and human behavior

have been evolving in the past few centuries. But in terms of understanding the diversity of human sexuality, Alfred Kinsey's studies on human sexuality are perhaps the most enlightening. Kinsey's first study was on male sexuality and was published in 1948.[xxi] Kinsey created a scale ranging from 0 to 6, where 0 represented no homosexual attractions and 6 representing only homosexual attractions (see Fig. 1).[xxii]



The startling results of Kinsey's study revealed that homosexuality was not nearly so rare a phenomenon as had been previously thought.[xxiii] Additionally the results brought to light the erroneous nature of the dualistic mode of thought regarding sexual orientation.xxii Instead there was an entire spectrum of sexuality.[xxiv] For those who experienced sexual attraction there was a broad spectrum of desires and behaviors ranging from the fully heterosexual to the fully homosexual. The term bisexual was coined for those who are firmly in the middle of the spectrum.[xxv] More recently the term pansexual has also developed as a way to be more inclusive to those who are gender fluid.[xxvi]

Most importantly, at least for asexuals, Kinsey's studies showed that there was a percentage of the population who did not experience sexual attraction at all. In his initial 1948 study, Kinsey reported that about 1.5% of the male population was "X," what we would refer to today as asexual or ace.[xxvii] While Kinsey also did a study on women, it was generally harder to find a broad spectrum of subjects for it. His findings in the 1953 article broke down those categorized as 'X's in the following was: unmarried females = 14–19%, married females = 1–3%, previously married females = 5–8%,

unmarried males = 3–4%, married males = 0%, and previously married males = 1–2%.[xxviii]

Understanding Asexuality: Bogaert's research

The concept of 'X's, or asexuality, was relatively ignored as the debate over homosexuality ignited and raged in the next half a century.[xxix] While occasionally mentioned in psychological and sociological research, the general assumption became that asexuality was a medical or psychological issue needing treatment.[xxx] Very little research into asexuality, particularly into those who self-identified as asexual, was done until the 2000s. Anthony Bogaert conducted one of the first studies into asexuality in 2004, with follow-up studies done in the decade after. His book *Understanding Asexuality*, published in 2012, is one of the few books available on the topic.

His 2004 study focused on a survey of the British population, and in that study he found that approximately 1% of the population experienced no sexual attraction to others.[xxxi] Like the 10% for homosexuality, loosely based on Kinsey's findings, 1% is the number that has come to be associated with asexuality. Additional studies showed some variance, just as additional studies have showed variance in the 10% number.[xxxii] Many reasons exist for variations in percentages, including different ages and groups included in the studies, cultural variances, and volunteer bias.[xxxiii] Other issues that affect reporting are: differing definitions of asexuality, confusions between lack of sexual attraction and low sexual drive, and the possibility that those who do not experience sexual attraction may not be willing to fill out questionnaires pertaining to sexual attraction and sexual behavior.[xxxiv]

Bogaert's 1% estimate is important for a couple of reasons. One, it is not far off from Kinsey's 1.5% of 'X's in the Male population. The differences in prevalence between male and female is another area that has not been researched much, partially as female sexuality has not been as well researched as male. Two, it is an easily remembered round number. Three, the number has surprised many because it suggests that a larger portion of the population is asexual than had been thought.[xxxv] Bogaert's study was the first to garner media attention, which more than likely helped increase the visibility of AVEN, a site which was only a few years old at the time of the study.

Asexuality: A mixed methods approach

A few years after Bogaert's studies had garnered media attention,

another group of social scientists and psychologists decided to do more research into the topic. This group decided to use a mixed methods approach, using both quantitative numerical data compiled from surveys and qualitative data compiled in interviews.[xxxvi] The participants were recruited from AVEN, which was at the time one of the only online forums focused on asexuality, making this the first study to more closely examine self-identified asexuals.

Study 1 was the quantitative survey, and focused on a wide variety of psychological and social factors. The researchers were looking for evidence that asexuals might have higher incidences of depression, alexithymia,[xxxvii] and Type A personality disorders.[xxxviii] They also wanted to compare asexuality and hyposexuality disorder, which is characterized by distress caused by a lack of sexual desire. Study 2 was the qualitative survey, which involved interviews designed to delve more deeply into the results of Study 1 including more thorough examinations of answers and the reasoning behind them.

The researchers' results supported the broader definition of asexuality Bogaert had suggested in his work (focusing on lack of sexual attraction rather than lack of sexual behavior).[xxxix] They also established that "asexuality did not appear to be a fear-mediated construct, and the lack of sexual activity was not related to avoidance or disgust when envisaging the genitals."[xl] Additionally they found that there was a general lack of distress about sexual function among asexuals, which suggests that asexuality might very well be different from hyposexuality (distress from low sex drive).[xli] The findings support the idea that asexuality is an orientation similar to the other sexual orientations.[xlii] Their studies also confirmed the idea that sexual attraction and romantic attraction are different things, as 70% of the respondents reported having had romantic relationships in the past (though "only 7% of men and 20.8% of women were in a relationship" when the study was conducted).[xliii]

Perhaps the most important finding of their two studies, at least for the asexual community, was that "asexuals are a mentally healthy group who continue to seek out and engage in rewarding, emotionally connected relationships."[xliv] This is critical to the asexual community because it supports the argument that asexuals can and do build other healthy and fulfilling relationships and specifically targets the cultural misconception that sexual

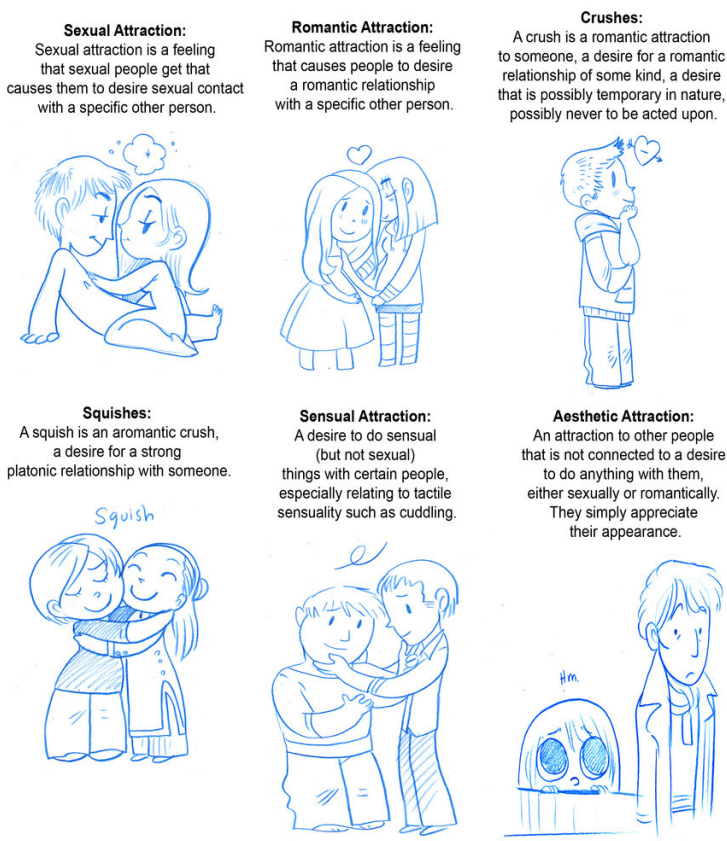
relationships are crucial for a person's health and happiness.

"You cannot love someone without wanting sex."

The Different Types of Attraction

Understanding attraction is vital when it comes to understanding relationships of all sorts, not just romantic and sexual relationship. The term attraction "refers to that rather basic, even primal, lure that draws us to someone or something."[xlv] Our culture tends to conflate sexual and romantic attraction, but the two are not the same thing. Nor are they the only types of attraction humans experience. When we limit ourselves to these, we deny the power of friendship, of family, of art, and of sensuality. We can be attracted to things that are not sexual or romantic in anyway. I find certain art more attractive or appealing than others. I am far more likely to have prints of Van Gogh[xlvi] than Mondrian[xlvii] in my apartment because I am more attracted to the style and color of Van Gogh's work. I find it more aesthetically appealing. Similarly I prefer soft fabrics because I find them sensually more appealing. These things have nothing to do with either sex or emotional intimacy, but they are still attractions.

Even if we limit our definitions of attraction to other humans, not every attraction we experience will be romantic or sexual. We form bonds with others because of an attraction of some sort. If we had no interest in them at all we would not form a bond with them. Not all of those bonds are sexual or romantic either. We form all sorts of friendships throughout our lives from less intimate acquaintances, to close friends, to those who share with us the same level of intimacy as our families. Figure 2[xlviii] below shows some of the common attractions people might experience.


Sexual Attraction:
Sexual attraction is a feeling that sexual people get that causes them to desire sexual contact with a specific other person.
Romantic Attraction:
Romantic attraction is a feeling that causes people to desire a romantic relationship with a specific other person.
Crushes:
A crush is a romantic attraction to someone, a desire for a romantic relationship of some kind, a desire that is possibly temporary in nature, possibly never to be acted upon.
Squishes:
A squish is an aromantic crush, a desire for a strong platonic relationship with someone.
Squish
Sensual Attraction:
A desire to do sensual (but not sexual) things with certain people, especially relating to tactile sensuality such as cuddling.
Aesthetic Attraction:
An attraction to other people that is not connected to a desire to do anything with them, either sexually or romantically. They simply appreciate their appearance.
Hm

Sexual Attraction[xlix]

"Sexual attraction refers to the “sexual” or lust lure for others."[l] Essentially this is the "spark" of attraction that connects and works with a person's sex drive or libido. Sexual attraction can occur at the same time as other attractions, or it might occur by itself. Most of my allosexual peers have discussed the feeling of being sexually attracted to strangers or celebrities in addition to being attracted to those who they have a deeper emotional connection with. Commonly heard comments that refer to sexual attraction are "I wouldn't kick her out of bed" and "I'd hit that."

Those who identify as asexual do not feel sexual attraction towards others. They may still experience romantic, sensual and/or aesthetic attraction. Demisexuals experience sexual attraction only when they also have an emotionally intimate relationship with someone. In other words they never have that experience of seeing a stranger and thinking "I'd love to have sex with that person."[li] Gray-aces, or gray-asexuals, are those who do not

experience sexual attraction the same way as their allosexual peers, but also do not consider themselves demi or ace.[lii]

Romantic Attraction

Romantic attraction is the desire to have a romantic relationship with someone. A romantic relationship is one that involves an intense level of emotional and physical intimacy, but differs from friendships, philial (brotherly) love, and filial (familial) love.[lii] For many allosexuals romantic and sexual attraction will sync, but not for all. Some allosexuals are aromantic, just as some asexuals are romantic. The remarkable diversity and breadth of spectrum is true for both sexual and romantic attractions.[liv]

Because romantic attraction deals with emotionally intimate relationships more so than the other types of attraction, it does include platonic subsets, namely the crush and squish described in the diagram above. Crushes are a desire for a romantic relationship of some kind, and that desire is more than likely temporary in nature. Those who experience romantic attraction might remember those days of childhood when doodling the name of your crush in your margins was a common past-time. A squish is an aromantic version of a crush, a generally temporary desire for a platonic relationship that is more emotionally intimate than friendship.

I consider myself a homoromantic asexual in that I have mostly found myself romantically attracted to other women. I have never felt that sexual spark of attraction though, which is why I consider myself asexual. Because I felt very uncomfortable with that fact until recently I would use my romantic and aesthetic attractions as a cover. So when my peers were discussing who they thought was "hot" I would substitute those who I wanted to have coffee with, or who I wanted to draw.

Aesthetic Attraction

Aesthetic attraction is being attracted to someone by appearance, sound, and other outwardly observable qualities. Outside of attraction to other humans, this is the type of attraction that drives our personal style and taste. We might like particular music because of our aesthetic attraction wiring. We might be attracted to a specific color scheme or pattern. Aesthetic attraction also applies to people. There are some people whose speaking voices I could listen to all day. There are also those that I find beautiful in a visual sense. I have a good bit of training in fine art, and so I often consider others in those

terms. This is how I have learned to define my versions of "hot," "fine," and other terms that are usually a reference to sexual attraction as well as aesthetic.

Sensual Attraction

Touch is a powerful, though often underrated, sense. Humans are social creatures and are generally wired to want tactile stimulus in addition to other stimulus. This is why baby toys often have different textures, all of which are considered to be pleasing to human senses. We develop sensual attractions to specific tactile sensations, and the same can apply within human interactions as well. Personal experience in this realm varies greatly. I generally only want to cuddle or snuggle with those who I have more intimate relationships with (romantic, philial, or familial). Others may experience this sort of attraction on a broader level.

"You can't be asexual if you masturbate, or if you have a significant other."

Sexual functioning and asexuality, aka my hormones are just fine, thank you

Research shows that asexuals masturbate in about the same ratio as allosexuals.[lv] The same research discussed these results with participants. The participants talked about varying levels of sexual desire, and most described their genital organs as functional.[lvi] The difference then between asexuals and allosexuals would be whom that sexual desire is directed towards, and whether another person can trigger that sexual desire.

Not all asexuals masturbate, and some have low-levels of sexual desire in addition to not experiencing sexual attraction. However limiting the definition of asexuality to those who do not masturbate excludes a large portion of people who do not experience sexual attraction. It disregards the physical reasons that one might masturbate, like relieving morning erections (a very natural phenomenon in men) or relieving menstrual cramps. As the above study showed many asexuals viewed it as a "clearing out of the plumbing."[lvii]

Sexual behavior does not equal sexual orientation

One of the biggest frustrations that asexuals face upon coming out is that responses include very personal questions that most would never dream of asking someone they did not have a very close friendship with. While

remarking about someone's propensity for dirty jokes is fairly benign, a great many also feel that it is acceptable to question whether the person coming out as ace has ever had sex or masturbated. It is off-putting and strange, not to mention offensive. But still people think they have the right to ask.[lviii]

This strange sort of orientation policing has occurred in other orientations as well.[lix] It could have something to do with the human tendency to break into groups of "us" versus "them." It may have something to do with the politicization of sex. It may be related to the medicalization of asexuality. It may be related to a cultural misunderstanding about the difference between attraction and behavior. It may be a combination of factors.

In the early days of sexuality research Kinsey and others based their research on observations and questions regarding sexual behavior. Since then researchers have come to realize that the two might not be related. There are a variety of reasons that someone might engage in a behavior where they lacked the corresponding attraction. Cultural pressures and expectations, and compromises within interpersonal relationships are perhaps two of the biggest reasons.

In much of America today, very few people would be comfortable telling a gay man that they just have not met the right woman yet, and even fewer would think of telling a straight man that he just has not met the right man yet. Few would feel comfortable questioning whether someone who has come out as lesbian had ever slept with a man. This is a huge change from just decades ago, or even currently in some locales, where these sorts of responses were the norm. In the thirty-plus years that I have been alive the views of homosexuality and bisexuality have shifted from mental disorders and amoral lifestyle choices, to facts of biology and normal sexual orientations.

What changed?: The politicization of sex

The 1950s ushered in a period of conservatism and restriction where anyone who differed from the norm was to be feared.[lx] The sexual revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s in many ways radicalized sexuality. While this led to great leaps forward for other minority sexual orientations, it also politicized sex.

This politicization would lead to increased visibility for gays and lesbians, which would in turn eventually lead to a better cultural and scientific understanding of homosexuality. While once considered to be sexual deviancy

and mental illness, homosexuality would eventually come to be seen as just another way to be wired. While there are still those who argue that sexual orientation is a choice, and push for therapy, they have become the minority.[lxi] Now therapy is usually only suggested if someone has a problem with their orientation, often due to internalized homophobia or negative experiences, and that therapy is generally focused on acceptance not denial or forced change.

But the politicization of sex also had some negative effects as well. Those uninterested in sex were repressed, frigid, or prudes. The boundaries between ability to have sex and desire to have sex blurred even more. An entire medical industry has arisen, focused solely on fixing sexual function. But many discuss this new field in terms of fixing sexual desire. In the 1990s the pharmaceutical companies discovered that a medication intended for treating high blood pressure and angina also "induce[d] marked penile erections".[lxii] The immense profits of Viagra led these companies to the race to try to find a "female Viagra."[lxiii] This in turn led to the creation of the "Female Sexual Dysfunction" diagnosis, closer working relationships between pharmacologists and sexuality researchers, and the boom of a sexual desire industry.[lxiv] All of this contributes to the cultural misunderstanding surrounding sexual function, desire levels, and orientation. It also contributes to the societal pressure to have sex and be sexuality active, because if you are not then there might be something **wrong** with you.

"So you plan on being the crazy cat lady? Alone the rest of your life?"

Difference between love and attraction

As discussed above, a whole host of different types of attraction that one can experience exists, especially when considered in the broader context of human relationships. You can be attracted to someone with whom you would like to build a friendship, or deeper platonic relationship. Love can develop from attraction. You might be drawn to a person based on a particular type of attraction, and as a relationship develops so too might love.

Love is a complicated emotion, and has many definitions.[lxv] People have been talking about it and arguing about definitions for millennia. Walk by a magazine stand and you will find a wide variety of articles on love. Our modern culture, particularly the culture of the past half-century or so, focuses

primarily on romantic love. The second-most focused on is the love between parent and child. But there are other types of love that can develop. We would otherwise never have deep meaningful relationships with anyone other than our parents or romantic partners.

I have not pursued many romantic relationships in my life, and those I have pursued have generally fizzled out because of my lack of sexual attraction. Because I could not articulate the lack of sexual attraction, the focus became on fixing something that might not be fixable. There were miscommunications and misunderstandings. I have serious health issues and so I have chosen to focus more on improving my health, especially after I was diagnosed with Lyme disease in the summer of 2010. Between pursuing treatment for a debilitating illness and pursuing a law degree I have had little time for dating. Despite the lack of romantic relationships in my life I am happy because I have developed deep, abiding and loving connections with others.

In addition to the deeper levels of friendships I also have deep, familial connections with both blood-kin and non-blood kin. I have an intricate, supportive network of healthy relationships and a wide variety of people who ensure that I know I am loved. These are the people have taught me to accept and love myself. So while I may have been single for most of my adult life, I have not been alone. Nor have I often been lonely. I still hope to find someone to have a romantic partnership with, someone with whom I can share my life on a different level than I do with my chosen family and my friends. But I know that I can be happy and fulfilled even if I never find that person.

"You were probably abused. You should see a therapist."

Assumptions of causation

Two common assumptions exist regarding the causation of asexuality: biological and traumatic. Biologically the general assumption has been that there is an underlying medical problem rather than an existing biologic tendency. This is complicated by the confusion surrounding sexual function, sexual desire levels, and sexual attraction.[lxvi] There are medical problems that will affect sexual function, which is the reason that Viagra exists and is so profitable. There are medical problems that affect sexual desire levels, like hormone disorders and certain auto-immune diseases. Some asexuals may

indeed have these issues, many do not. Additionally fixing an underlying functionality or sex drive problem will not change a person's orientation. Someone who is straight will not suddenly become gay upon taking Viagra or undergoing hormone treatment, nor will someone who is asexual suddenly become allosexual.

For example, I have an auto-immune disease, Lyme, and have likely had it since I was about seven years old as that is when I recall having a very strange bulls-eye like rash and flu-like symptoms. It is also when I recall my health starting to deteriorate. I had been a fairly healthy and active child prior to that, but started getting ill more frequently, and began to experience problems with fatigue and pain that only got worse as I grew older. Lyme is a disease that can negatively affect sex drive, and mine, which was not very high to begin with, has decreased to almost nothing over the years. I am now in the second year of treatment and have noticed a marked increase in sex drive. I have however not developed any sexual attractions to anyone and have no desire to have a sexual relationship with someone else, despite the increase in sex drive. In other words, my drive works but is not connected to anything else.

The other commonly assumed cause for asexuality is trauma, usually sexual trauma though some have speculated that neurological trauma may also be a factor.[lxvii] This was also once a commonly assumed cause for homosexuality, but has since been disproven.[lxviii] Perhaps the biggest factor in debunking this myth for both asexuals and other queer sexual orientations is that the numbers simply do not add up.[lxix] Statistics on sexual abuse show a much higher percentage of the population has been sexually abused than those who identify as either queer or asexual.[lxx] If sexual trauma was a cause of asexuality then there would be a much higher number of those who identified as asexual.

Trauma does have a huge impact on the brains, behavior, and lives of those who experience it. There may very well be those who choose to be celibate as a result of their trauma, but that does not necessarily mean they are or are not asexual, nor does it mean that all asexuals must have experienced trauma.

In my own experience childhood sexual trauma is one of the reasons it took me longer to become aware of and accepting of my asexuality. I

assumed that my lack of attraction was caused by my experiences, despite knowing others who had similar experiences and yet experienced high sexual drive and sexual attraction to others. I have gone through more than ten years of therapy and work, and am much more comfortable in my skin and in my interpersonal relationships than I once was. However I still lack any feelings of sexual attraction towards others.

The problems of medicalizing asexuality, aka trying to fix what is not broken

Medicalizing sexual orientation increases stigmatization and victimization. It was neither ethical nor effective to treat homosexual men with hormones,[lxxi] a treatment that was also used as a punishment for deviant behavior,[lxxii] or shock therapy.[lxxiii] The problems with conversion therapy have been detailed thoroughly.[lxxiv] Society often takes its cues on what is considered normal from the medical industry. So if the medical industry diagnoses a normal variation of human experience (like sexual orientation) as an illness, then society treats that variation as lesser than the norm. This increases cultural stigma and chances for prejudice, violence and discrimination. All of these things multiply the chances of internal struggles and distress, essentially turning something that might not be a problem into something that is a problem.

The psychological consequences of sexual trauma, whether experienced as a child or an adult, are numerous and varied, and survivors should seek treatment. Survivors are already stigmatized culturally and it is important not to stigmatize their sexual orientation or treat it as an issue arising out of trauma.

"You just want to feel special. It is not like asexuals get discriminated against."

Cultural vs. legal discrimination

Discrimination can be defined as "the act, practice, or an instance of discriminating categorically rather than individually; prejudiced or prejudicial outlook, action, or treatment."[lxxv] Discrimination can occur within the broader aspects of culture and within the laws. One can have equality under the law, but still not have equality within the culture. Encouraging stereotypes, discouraging visibility of a culture, and stigmatizing that culture are forms of discrimination in culture. Denying access to marry, allowing someone to be

fired based on their sexual orientation or gender identification, and allowing housing to be denied for those same reasons are examples of discrimination in the law.

The Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment has been used to defeat many types of legal discrimination in the past, particularly discrimination based on race or biological sex. But what many do not realize is that there are different levels of scrutiny that the court applies in such cases.[lxxvi] The highest level of scrutiny that can be applied is strict scrutiny, which requires the government prove that the challenged legislation serves a compelling governmental interest, and is narrowly tailored to serve that interest.[lxxvii] Strict scrutiny is triggered "when a statute classifies by race, alienage, or national origin."[lxxviii] These categories are considered "suspect classes" based on the long history of discrimination and disenfranchisement these groups have seen.[lxxix] However such a history of discrimination and disenfranchisement is not always enough to qualify a group as a suspect class. Women, for example are considered a "quasi-suspect class."[lxxx] A sort of intermediate scrutiny has been developed for those that fit this category.[lxxxi] Intermediate scrutiny requires legislation to be substantially related to an important governmental interest.[lxxxii] The lowest level is rational basis scrutiny, which states that "[t]he general rule is that legislation is presumed to be valid and will be sustained if the classification drawn by the statute is rationally related to a legitimate state interest."[lxxxiii]

Sexual orientation has yet to be elevated to even a quasi-suspect class by the Supreme Court, leaving sexual orientation in the realm of rational basis review. It is very hard to overturn a law under rational basis scrutiny because the court gives the legislature more deference in such cases. However it is possible, and several of the biggest court successes for the queer community were decided under rational basis review.[lxxxiv]

Lawrence v. Texas[lxxxv] decriminalized sodomy. This was a huge win for queer activists as arguments supporting discrimination based on sexual orientation often cited the laws criminalizing homosexual behavior as a basis for acceptable discrimination.[lxxxvi] However decriminalizing sexual orientation was only one step in the fight for legal equality. Many states still allow discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in housing and employment.[lxxvii] This is important for asexuals to consider as asexuality

is a minority sexual orientation, and as more asexuals come out they may face more open legal discrimination.

While legal discrimination is detrimental and has a large impact on individuals and communities, cultural discrimination is in many ways more insidious because it is harder to define. Our legal system likes discrete boxes and clear-cut categories, but individual circumstances and realities are rarely discrete and clear-cut. Legal protections can give people power to try to fight cultural discrimination. They can undermine cultural discrimination. But they do not make the underlying cultural discriminations disappear. Often, they just hide them by finding ways to justify the discrimination within the context of the law.[lxxxviii]

Being asexual in a sexual world: cultural discrimination

Open a magazine, turn on the television, or surf the net. One thing you will notice is that our culture is heavily sexualized. Sex, sexual desire, and relationship advice all sell and sell well. Our culture is incredibly focused on sexual and romantic relationships, often conflating the two. If you are not interested in sex, then something must be wrong with you. The few media examples of asexuals that we have are highly stereotyped and are often treated by other characters as lesser or broken.

There are two main stereotypes for asexuals: the overgrown child, and the socially inept and broken genius. The overgrown child is an adult who comes across as naive and innocent, and is often portrayed as just not that bright. Gilligan from *Gilligan's Island* is a classic example of this trope.[lxxxix] The socially inept, broken genius is exemplified in two well known characters: Sherlock Holmes[xc] and Sheldon Cooper.[xci] Both are characterized as too brilliant to be interested in issues of the body, both are portrayed as misanthropic and misogynistic, and both are generally portrayed as being very bad at all interpersonal relations. The female equivalent of this stereotype is the "Crazy Cat Lady."[xcii]

These sorts of stereotypes encourage society as a whole to treat asexuals as jokes, as problems, and as children. Add the stereotypes to the base assumption that everyone must want sex and you have a situation ripe for bullying. When David Jay, the founder of AVEN, went on The View and other shows he was often made the butt of jokes.[xciii] And it is not just the larger, mostly heterosexual, culture that feels free belittling or dismissing

asexuality. Dan Savage, most well known for creating the "It Gets Better" campaign, an anti-suicide campaign targeting queer youth, said the following during an interview for the documentary (A)sexual:[xciv]

> It is kind of funny when you think about it. You've got the gays marching for the right to be cock-sucking homosexuals, but then you have the asexuals marching for the right to not do anything, which is hilarious. You did not need to march for that right. You just need to stay home and not do anything.

Now imagine living in a world where you are told consistently that you do not exist. You are belittled and told that there is something wrong with you for thinking that you do exist. You might even try desperately to be normal, to "fix" yourself. When nothing changes, no matter how much you try, you become convinced that **you** are the problem.

Queer youth face higher rates of suicide, depression and anxiety. A recent study on asexuals showed an even higher rate of suicidal thoughts, depression and anxiety than what is normally found in the queer community. Specific studies have not yet been done on asexual youth, but it is highly likely that they face a rate even higher than homosexual and bisexual youth because the stigma of asexuality exists at some level even in the broader queer community. Being rejected by a group that has thrived on a message of acceptance and equality is a particularly painful experience. Pervading cultural bias against asexuals does exist and that sort of intrinsic, entrenched bias causes great harm to the individual experiencing it. Asexuals are no different from the rest of the queer community, except for being perceived as queer in the classic sense of the word[xcv] by both the mainstream and queer communities.

Legal equality issues that may arise

It is hard to address the legal equality issues that asexuals face, because there has been no research done and are no cases that deal expressly with asexuality. Asexuality has not been a visible identity until very recently. Even now it is a marginal and tiny community, fragile in its infancy. While there is some support from the scientific and medical community on the fact that asexuality is an orientation and not an illness or dysfunction, there is no consensus. It was only in 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association began the process of removing homosexuality from Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).[xcvi] At that time homosexuality as a

diagnosis was replaced by ego-dystonic homosexuality, which focused on the distress a person experienced because of their non-heterosexuality.[xcvii] It was not until 1986 that homosexuality was removed completely from the DSM.[xcviii]

It was around that time that the queer community in the United States starting seeing more substantial gains in legal rights and protections.[xcix] More states and municipalities started enacting anti-discrimination laws that included sexual orientation. In the infancy of the gay rights movement, long before Stonewall, few would have dared raise the issue of legal discrimination based sexual orientation.

Some might argue that asexuality and the other sexual orientation minorities are not the same, after all one could not have been jailed for being asexual. Criminalization is only one piece of the legal discrimination puzzle though. Because stigmatization of asexuality, and of being unattached romantically for long periods of time, still exists, asexuals may experience discrimination in the work place. Just as homosexuality was once considered deviant and the majority of people worried about homosexuals teaching their children, the same could be applied to asexuals. There is sometimes an assumption that if you do not have a visible sexuality you must be hiding a darker nature like pedophilia. After all there must be something wrong with you.

Currently one of the only mentions of asexuals in case law is a dismissive joke in *Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services, Inc.*[c] *Oncale* is a case that deals with same sex sexual harassment and finds that a claim of same sex sexual harassment may be actionable under Title VII. Within the majority opinion Justice Scalia notes flippantly that "[t]he prohibition of harassment on the basis of sex requires neither asexuality nor androgyny in the workplace; it forbids only behavior so objectively offensive as to alter the “conditions” of the victim's employment."[ci] His remark makes both asexuality and androgyny seem fantastical and is very dismissive. This reflects the larger cultural view that asexuality does not exist, and indicates that asexuals may face an uphill battle in legal discrimination cases.

Other legal issues that asexuals face are very much the same legal issues that face anyone who has non-traditional relationships and families, namely how to legally structure your life so that your relationships are

acknowledged and honored. Heterosexual couples can achieve much of this documentation through a marriage, and in those places with civil unions or marriage equality so too can same-sex couples. An asexual could theoretical achieve similar results through marriage, but there is a snag. Marriages that are truly asexual, and therefore unconsummated, can be legally annulled. So if I was married to another ace and one of us died, their family could challenge the marriage on the grounds that it was not a marriage as sex was not involved. With asexuality still being medicalized and stigmatized it is possible that such a challenge would be upheld and the remaining spouse would be left with no rights.

Some may think it is ridiculous to even imagine this sort of situation, but for those of us who have abusive and toxic relationships within our families of origin it is a pressing concern. I have had to think about living wills and durable power of attorney because I do not want my mother to have any say in my end of life care or estate. Instead I have a close, very tightly-knit family of my choosing, who I know will abide by my wishes and desires. This may seem like a simple issue, but as anyone who has done any end of life and estate planning can tell you it is far from easy. Even as a third year law student it is not easy to find the correct forms, let alone to know what to include to make them as air-tight as possible. I did not even think about these issues until the topic of estates came up. This is another reason why visibility and education are important. Having a community means having resources that improve access to valuable and helpful information.

"Why should I care?" The importance of visibility

Visibility, education, and discourse are some of the ways different groups can fight cultural and legal discrimination. Increased visibility of the asexual community is critically important not just to strengthen a young and fragile community, which in turn would provide hope and resources to a marginalized and stigmatized group, but also to bring about better cultural understanding of human sexuality, particularly female sexuality since at the moment women cannot win in our culture.[cii] Women who are sexual are often shamed through the use of words like "slut," and "whore." Women who are not overly sexual or sexual at all are shamed through words and phrases like "frigid bitch," and "prude." Additionally visibility would be helpful for communities that are traditionally presumed to be asexual, but are not, like

those who are disabled or the elderly.

The most critical thing, though, is increased awareness and support for the asexual community. No one should have to feel alone, or think that they are inherently worth less than those around them. Many asexuals know that they are different at a very early age, just like many others in the queer community. They should not have to grow up feeling isolated, alone and wrong. I would encourage the broader queer community to consider the history of homosexual and bisexual rights and community; to open their arms to the asexual community. There are so many experiences that these groups share, and we could learn a great deal from one another. Standing together we can achieve so much more.

I knew from an early age that I was different. By the time I hit puberty I knew I was not the same as others sexually either. I was not quite "straight," but I did not know how to quantify what I was. I spent my adolescence in the Bible Belt, and my knowledge of the queer spectrum was vastly limited to "queers are going to hell" until my junior year of high school when I went to boarding school. This was the first time I met others who identified as queer in one way or another. Some were out as bisexual, others as gay or lesbian. This was the first time I became aware there were options other than "deviant going to hell." I would go on to try several labels and identities, but none of them fit quite right. It was not until my first year of law school, now in my thirties, that I found others who identified as asexual. The click of recognition that came when reading their stories and experiences was amazing.

I have been in the early stages of the coming out process. I've come out to most of my family and closest friends. I'm slowly coming out at school and among my peer group. I participate in online communities. I am slowing starting respond to questions and assumptions of sexuality with the fact that I am asexual instead of ducking the issue or identifying as lesbian. I am finding it surprisingly more difficult to come out as asexual compared to my coming out experience as a lesbian, which was difficult enough considering it was the late 1990s and I lived in a very conservative and homophobic area of Louisiana. But at least then I knew I would be accepted within the queer community, and I in fact helped start the first queer-oriented group at my college. There is far more uncertainty in coming out ace. My father's response is probably the most comforting and most interesting. When I told him about

this paper and why I was working on it, he said, "Well at least I know where you got that from" followed shortly by the wondrous exclamation "there's a community for that now?!"

Going forward we need to support and nurture that community. What is needed now is greater visibility of asexuals, demisexuals and gray-asexuals, and increased support from asexual allies. Tolerance and understanding within both the asexual and larger queer communities is a must. If we do not accept each other, how can we expect the larger world to accept us? Diversity allows us to thrive rather than stagnate. I encourage queer community centers to include information about the asexuality spectrum on their websites and in their physical outreach pamphlets. Give asexuals, demisexuals and gray-asexuals a chance, listen to their stories and do not dismiss them outright. Asexuals and those within the asexual spectrum should be aware of the huge diversity within the spectrum and be encouraging and accepting to others as well. All of these things will help broaden the general discussion about human sexuality, and help improve our understanding and tolerance of those who are different from us. It can be terrifying and dangerous to come out as different. The more we educate each other, the more safe spaces we create, the better off we all are.

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About the Author

Amanda C. Lee was born in Spokane, WA, but spent the majority of her childhood and adolescence in Northwest Louisiana. She has lived in five U.S. states (Washington, Arizona, Lousiana, Vermont, and Virginia), and spent two years in Mandeville, Jamaica. She is a proud alumna of Louisiana School for Math, Science and the Arts, a unique and remarkable residential high school in Natchitoches, LA. She achieved her Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from Centenary College of Louisiana, and a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer. She spent the time between undergrad and law school doing various administrative, teaching, and social work type jobs. Currently she is in her seventh semester as a student at Vermont Law School, and completing an externship for that program in Northern Virginia. When she is not studying, or freaking out about taking the Bar exam this coming February, she spends her free time trying to catch up on the many movies and television shows she never got around to watching, reading, writing poetry, and spoiling the household cat. One of these days she plans on getting back into art as a hobby.